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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 0692

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000112

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO LIMBERT AND CORBIN; NEA/I AND NEA/IR.  
NSC FOR TALWAR, MAGSAMEN, PHEE, AND VROOMAN.

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TAGS: PGOV PREL IR TU IZ

SUBJECT: SENIOR MFA OFFICIAL ON MOTTAKI VISIT AND IRAQ-IRAN BORDER DISPUTE

REF: A. BAGHDAD 3326

IB. 09 BAGHDAD 2237

Classified By: Acting Political M/C Yuri Kim for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d )

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Ambassador Taha Shukr Abbassi, the head of the Iraqi MFA's Neighboring Countries' division (A/S equivalent), made the following comments regarding Iranian FM Mottaki's visit and the recent oil field dispute between Iraq and Iran: (1) Mottaki promised to fully withdraw Iranian soldiers from the disputed oil field (ref A) and pressed the GOI to conduct joint surveys of the Iran-Iraq border; (2) the Iranians have not yet withdrawn their soldiers; (3) GOI technical survey teams will begin their work once Iranian soldiers fully withdraw; (3) the incident has tarnished Iran's standing among many Iraqi Shi'a supporters; (4) the GOI does not recognize the 1975 Algiers Accord governing border issues and would like to negotiate a new or amended agreement with Iran; (5) Iran, unlike Turkey, is slow in fulfilling its promises and implementing bilateral agreements; and (6) Iraq recognizes the need to proceed patiently and diplomatically in its dealing with Iran to ensure a peaceful outcome to these and other disputes. END SUMMARY.

Iranian Troops Still Present

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¶2. (C) On January 13, Ambassador Taha Shukr Abbassi met with Post's Deputy Political Counselor and Senior Iran Watcher to discuss FM Mottaki's recent visit in light of the Fakka oil field incident. Abbassi, a career diplomat who has had extensive dealings with the Iranians, confirmed that FM Mottaki pressed the GOI during his visit to resume the work of a technical committee tasked with conducting joint surveys along the Iran-Iraq border, including the maritime border. FM Mottaki offered assurances of Iranian troop withdrawal from the disputed oil field; however, the continued presence of Iranian troops called into question Iran's willingness to deliver on its promises, Abbassi complained. He added that the Iranian incursion has undermined Iran's standing among many Iraqi Shi'a supporters, who viewed the dispute as nothing more than typical Iranian aggression and interference in Iraqi affairs.

¶3. (C) Abbassi criticized Mottaki for failing to keep his promise and said the work of the two GOI technical teams (land and water) would only begin once all Iranian troops have fully withdrawn from the disputed area. Abbassi asserted that the work of the committees "will take years to complete" given the complexity of the terrain and the security risks posed by landmines that are scattered along the border areas since the Iran-Iraq war. Senior MFA Advisor Mohammed al-Haj Hamoud told DCM the same day that the Iraqis had been ready to allow the working groups to start

their work, even with the less-than-complete Iranian border, "We're only talking about a 100 meters or so and the border area is admittedly undefined," but then the Iranians moved in high-powered lights and a small piece of artillery. Following that, FM Zebari had ordered the teams to stand down at present, said Haj Hamoud, adding that an additional "partial withdrawal, a gesture" might be enough to get the work back on track. (NOTE: USG satellite imagery confirms the continued presence of Iranian troops approximately 75-100 meters inside Iraq. Imagery has also captured what appears to be Iranian construction activity, including the Qto be Iranian construction activity, including the establishment of a small building near the troop outpost. END NOTE)

Iran Not As Reliable As Turkey

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¶4. (C) Describing Iran's intransigence as usual Iranian stubbornness and inefficiency when it comes to implementing agreements, Abbassi said that over a year ago, he personally presented Mottaki with a non-paper proposing a new way forward on Iraq-Iran relations, focusing largely on bilateral issues such as borders, maritime rights, natural resources, etc. The paper was intended to wipe the slate clean for both countries, who technically remain in a state of war following the cessation of hostilities in 1988. "We have not heard back regarding the paper," Abbassi lamented. "The Iranians still feel that they are dealing with the same Iraq that Saddam dominated for so long. But we are a very different country now," Abbassi said in trying to explain lingering Iranian suspicions about GOI intentions. In comparison, Abbassi

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applauded the efficiency of the Turkish government in its dealings with Iraq, stating that "Turkey is very good at following-up and keeping promises."

Algiers Accord Obsolete

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¶5. (C) Abbassi commented that the GOI does not accept or formally recognize the 1975 Algiers Accord that was signed between then-Vice President Saddam Hussein and the Shah of Iran. Abbassi noted that Saddam himself literally tore up the agreement during the war with Iran and that no current or future Iraqi parliament would ratify the agreement in its present form. (NOTE: The agreement was ratified under Iraqi President al-Bakr's government and subsequently registered with the UN. END NOTE.) According to Abbassi, the GOI would welcome a new or amended agreement that takes into account existing political and geographic realities, notably with the Shatt-al-Arab waterway since 1975. However, the Iranians are reluctant to renegotiate because they fear losing territory and waters claimed in the Shatt al-Arab, which a new demarcation would likely not recognize, Abbassi said. (NOTE: Despite repeated condemnation of the Algiers Accord by numerous GOI officials, the GOI has never made use of any of the dispute resolution mechanisms contained in the agreement, nor made any attempt to legally terminate the agreement. END NOTE.)

¶6. (C) Abbassi asked about what military support, if any, the USG would be obliged or willing to provide to Iraq under the Security Agreement in the event of future aggression by any of its neighbors. He also encouraged greater USG public statements condemning Iranian aggression as a violation of international law in order to demonstrate to the Iraqi public the USG's moral support for Iraq's territorial integrity. Abbassi underscored that Iraq's relations with Iran will require patience and diplomacy given historic grievances and lingering suspicions.

COMMENT

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¶7. (C) Water and border disputes will continue to define Iran and Iraq's broader bilateral agenda as Iraq regains its political footing and maturity. Iran's reluctance (and discomfort) in dealing with Iraq as an equal partner on sensitive issues of broader public concern (water rights, borders, trade) are likely to further erode GOI and Iraqi public confidence in their closest neighbor's intentions and "goodwill". Abbassi's comments highlight the challenges he and other technocrats face in their dealings with Iran. It is also increasingly apparent that both sides realize that their bilateral dealings are driven less by a shared Shi'a heritage and more by real-world priorities and diverging interests.